**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**PHILIPPIANS-009**. **WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12.* *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."*

*Philippians 2:12-13*

What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder! Here are, joined together, in the compass of one practical exhortation, the truths which, put asunder, have been the war-cries and shibboleths of contending sects ever since. Faith in a finished salvation, and yet work; God working all in me, and yet I able and bound to work likewise; God upholding and sustaining His child to the very end; perfecting that which concerns him, making his salvation certain and sure, and yet the Christian working with fear and trembling, lest he should be a castaway and come short of the grace of God;--who does not recognise in these phrases the mottoes that have been written on the opposing banners in many a fierce theological battle, waged with much harm to both sides, and ending in no clear victory for either? Yet here they are blended in the words of one who was no less profound a thinker than any that have come after, and who had the gift of a divine inspiration to boot.

Not less remarkable than the fusion here of apparent antagonisms, the harmonising of apparent opposites, is the intensely practical character of the purpose for which they are adduced at all. Paul has no idea of giving his disciples a lesson in abstract theology, or laying for them a foundation of a philosophy of free will and divine sovereignty; he is not merely communicating to these Philippians truths for their creed, but precepts for their deeds. The Bible knows nothing of an unpractical theology, but, on the other hand, the Bible knows still less of an untheological morality. It digs deep, bottoming the simplest right action upon right thinking, and going down to the mountain bases on which the very pillars of the universe rest, in order to lay there, firm and immovable the courses of the temple of a holy life. Just as little as Scripture gives countenance to the error that makes religion theology rather than life, just so little does it give countenance to the far more contemptible and shallower error common in our day, which says, Religion is not theology, but life; and means, Therefore, it does not matter what theology you have, you can work a good life out with any creed! The Bible never teaches unpractical speculations, and the Bible never gives precepts which do not rest on the profoundest truths. Would God, brethren, that we all had souls as wide as would take in the whole of the many-sided scriptural representation of the truths of the Gospel, and so avoid the narrowness of petty, partial views of God's infinite counsel; and that we had as close, direct, and as free communication between head, and heart, and hand, as the Scripture has between precept and practice!

But in reference more especially to my text. Keeping in view these two points I have already suggested, namely,--that it is the reconciling of apparent opposites, and that it is intensely practical, I find in it these three thoughts;--First, a Christian has his whole salvation accomplished for him, and yet he is to work it out. Secondly, a Christian has everything done in him by God, and yet he is to work. Lastly, a Christian has his salvation certainly secured, and yet he is to fear and tremble.

**I. In the first place, A Christian man has his whole salvation already accomplished for him in Christ, and yet he is to work it out.**

There are two points absolutely necessary to be kept in view in order to a right understanding of the words before us, for the want of noticing which it has become the occasion of terrible mistakes. These are--the persons to whom it is addressed, and the force of the scriptural expression salvation. As to the first, this exhortation has been misapplied by being addressed to those who have no claim to be Christians, and by having such teaching deduced from it as, You do your part, and God will do His; You work, and God will certainly help you; You co-operate in the great work of your salvation, and you will get grace and pardon through Jesus Christ. Now let us remember the very simple thing, but very important to the right understanding of these words, that none but Christian people have anything to do with them. To all others, to all who are not already resting on the finished salvation of Jesus Christ, this injunction is utterly inapplicable. It is addressed to the beloved, who have always obeyed; to the saints in Christ Jesus, which are at Philippi. The whole Epistle is addressed, and this injunction with the rest, to Christian men. That is the first thing to be remembered. If there be any of you, who have thought that these words of Paul's to those who had believed on Christ contained a rule of action for you, though you have not rested your souls on Him, and exhorted you to try to win salvation by your own doings, let me remind you of what Christ said when the Jews came to Him in a similar spirit and asked Him, What shall we do that we may work the works of God? His answer to them was, and His answer to you, my brother, is, This is the work of God, that ye should believe in Him whom He hath sent. That is the first lesson: Not work, but faith; unless there be faith, no work. Unless you are a Christian, the passage has nothing to do with you.

But now, if this injunction be addressed to those who are looking for their salvation only to the perfect work of Christ, how can they be exhorted to work it out themselves? Is not the oft-recurring burden of Paul's teaching not by works of righteousness, which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us? How does this text harmonise with these constantly repeated assertions that Christ has done all for us, and that we have nothing to do, and can do nothing? To answer this question, we have to remember that that scriptural expression, salvation, is used with considerable width and complexity of signification. It sometimes means the whole of the process, from the beginning to the end, by which we are delivered from sin in all its aspects, and are set safe and stable at the right hand of God. It sometimes means one or other of three different parts of that process--either deliverance from the guilt, punishment, condemnation of sin; or secondly, the gradual process of deliverance from its power in our own hearts; or thirdly, the completion of that process by the final and perfect deliverance from sin and sorrow, from death and the body, from earth and all its weariness and troubles, which is achieved when we are landed on the other side of the river. Salvation, in one aspect, is a thing past to the Christian; in another, it is a thing present; in a third, it is a thing future. But all these three are one; all are elements of the one deliverance--the one mighty and perfect act which includes them all.

These three all come equally from Christ Himself. These three all depend equally on His work and His power. These three are all given to a Christian man in the first act of faith. But the attitude in which he stands in reference to that accomplished salvation which means deliverance from sin as a penalty and a curse, and that in which he stands to the continuing and progressive salvation which means deliverance from the power of evil in his own heart, are somewhat different. In regard to the one, he has only to take the finished blessing. He has to exercise faith and faith alone. He has nothing to do, nothing to add, in order to fit himself for it, but simply to receive the gift of God, and to believe on Him whom He hath sent. But then, though that reception involves what shall come after it, and though every one who has and holds the first thing, the pardon of his transgression, has and holds thereby and therein his growing sanctifying and his final glory, yet the salvation which means our being delivered from the evil that is in our hearts, and having our souls made like unto Christ, is one which--free gift though it be--is not ours on the sole condition of an initial act of faith, but is ours on the condition of continuous faithful reception and daily effort, not in our own strength, but in God's strength, to become like Him, and to make our own that which God has given us, and which Christ is continually bestowing upon us.

The two things, then, are not inconsistent--an accomplished salvation, a full, free, perfect redemption, with which a man has nothing to do at all, but to take it;--and, on the other hand, the injunction to them who have received this divine gift: Work out your own salvation. Work, as well as believe, and in the daily practice of faithful obedience, in the daily subjugation of your own spirits to His divine power, in the daily crucifixion of your flesh with its affections and lusts, in the daily straining after loftier heights of godliness and purer atmospheres of devotion and love--make more thoroughly your own that which you possess. Work into the substance of your souls that which you have. Apprehend that for which you are apprehended of Christ. Give all diligence to make your calling and election sure; and remember that not a past act of faith, but a present and continuous life of loving, faithful work in Christ, which is His and yet yours, is the holding fast the beginning of your confidence firm unto the end.

**II. In the second place, God works all in us, and yet we have to work.**

There can be no mistake about the good faith and firm emphasis--as of a man who knows his own mind, and knows that his word is true--with which the Apostle holds up here the two sides of what I venture to call the one truth; Work out your own salvation--for God works in you. Command implies power. Command and power involve duty. The freedom of the Christian's action, the responsibility of the believer for his Christian growth in grace, the committal to the Christian man's own hands of the means of sanctifying, lie in that injunction, Work out your own salvation. Is there any faltering, any paring down or cautious guarding of the words, in order that they may not seem to clash with the other side of the truth? No: Paul does not say, Work it out; yet it is God that worketh in you; not Work it out although it is God that worketh in you; not Work it out, but then it must always be remembered and taken as a caution that it is God that worketh in you! He blends the two things together in an altogether different connection, and sees--strangely to some people, no contradiction, nor limitation, nor puzzle, but a ground of encouragement to cheerful obedience. Do you work, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure. And does the Apostle limit the divine operation? Notice how his words seem picked out on purpose to express most emphatically its all-pervading energy. Look how his words seem picked out on purpose to express with the utmost possible emphasis that all which a good man is, and does, is its fruit. It is God that worketh in you. That expresses more than bringing outward means to bear upon heart and will. It speaks of an inward, real, and efficacious operation of the Indwelling Spirit of all energy on the spirit in which He dwells. Worketh in you to will; this expresses more than the presentation of motives from without, it points to a direct action on the will, by which impulses are originated within. God puts in you the first faint motions of a better will. Worketh in you, doing as well as willing; this points to all practical obedience, to all external acts as flowing from His grace in us, no less than all inward good thoughts and holy desires.

It is not that God gives men the power, and then leaves them to make the use of it. It is not that the desire and purpose come forth from Him, and that then we are left to ourselves to be faithful or unfaithful stewards in carrying it out. The whole process, from the first sowing of the seed until its last blossoming and fruiting, in the shape of an accomplished act, of which God shall bless the springing--it is all God's together! There is a thorough-going, absolute attribution of every power, every action, all the thoughts words, and deeds of a Christian soul, to God. No words could be selected which would more thoroughly cut away the ground from every half-and-half system which attempts to deal them out in two portions, part God's and part mine. With all emphasis Paul attributes all to God.

And none the less strongly does he teach, by the implication contained in his earnest injunction, that human responsibility, that human control over the human will, and that reality of human agency which are often thought to be annihilated by these broad views of God as originating all good in the soul and life. The Apostle thought that this doctrine did not absorb all our individuality in one great divine Cause which made men mere tools and puppets. He did not believe that the inference from it was, Therefore do you sit still, and feel yourselves the cyphers that you are. His practical conclusion is the very opposite. It is--God does all, therefore do you work. His belief in the power of God's grace was the foundation of the most intense conviction of the reality and indispensableness of his own power, and was the motive which stimulated him to vigorous action. Work, for God works in you.

Each of these truths rests firmly on its own appropriate evidence. My own consciousness tells me that I am free, that I have power, that I am therefore responsible and exposed to punishment for neglect of duty. I know what I mean when I speak of the will of God, because I myself am conscious of a will. The power of God is an object of intelligent thought to me, because I myself am conscious of power. And on the other hand, that belief in a God which is one of the deep and universal beliefs of men contains in it, when it comes to be thought about, the belief in Him as the source of all power, as the great cause of all. If I believe in a God at all, I must believe that He whom I so call, worketh all things after the counsel of His own will. These two convictions are both given to us in the primitive beliefs which belong to us all. The one rests on consciousness, and underlies all our moral judgments. The other rests on an original belief, which belongs to man as such. These two mighty pillars on which all morality and all religion repose have their foundations down deep in our nature, and tower up beyond our sight. They seem to stand opposite to each other, but it is only as the strong piers of some tall arch are opposed. Beneath they repose on one foundation, above they join together in the completing keystone and bear the whole steady structure.

Wise and good men have toiled to harmonise them, in vain. The task transcends the limits of human faculties, as exercised here, at all events. Perhaps the time may come when we shall be lifted high enough to see the binding arch, but here on earth we can only behold the shafts on either side. The history of controversy on the matter surely proves abundantly what a hopeless task they undertake who attempt to reconcile these truths. The attempt has usually consisted in speaking the one loudly and the other in a whisper, and then the opposite side has thundered what had been whispered, and has whispered very softly what had been shouted very loudly. One party lays hold of the one pole of the ark, and the other lays hold of that on the other side. The fancied reconciliation consists in paring down one half of the full-orbed truth to nothing, or in admitting it in words while every principle of the reconciler's system demands its denial. Each antagonist is strong in his assertions, and weak in his denials, victorious when he establishes his half of the whole, easily defeated when he tries to overthrow his opponent's.

This apparent incompatibility is no reason for rejecting truths each commended to our acceptance on its own proper grounds. It may be a reason for not attempting to dogmatise about them. It may be a warning to us that we are on ground where our limited understandings have no firm footing, but it is no ground for suspecting the evidence which certifies the truths. The Bible admits and enforces them both. It never tones down the emphasis of its statement of the one for fear of clashing against the other, but points to us the true path for thought, in a firm grasp of both, in the abandonment of all attempts to reconcile them, and for practical conduct, in the peaceful trust in God who hath wrought all our works in us, and in strenuous working out of our own salvation. Let us, as we look back on that battlefield where much wiser men than we have fought in vain, doing little but raising up a little dust that is lightly laid again, and building trophies that are soon struck down, learn the lesson it teaches, and be contented to say, The short cord of my plummet does not quite go down to the bottom of the bottomless, and I do not profess either to understand God or to understand man, both of which I should want to do before I understood the mystery of their conjoint action. Enough for me to believe that,

If any force we have, it is to ill, And all the power is God's, to do and eke to will.

Enough for me to know that I have solemn duties laid upon me, a life's task to be done, my deliverance from mine own evil to work out, and that I shall only accomplish that work when I can say with the Apostle, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.

God is all, but thou canst work! My brother, take this belief, that God worketh all in you, for the ground of your confidence, and feel that unless He do all, you can do nothing. Take this conviction, that thou canst work, for the spur and stimulus of thy life, and think, These desires in my soul come from a far deeper source than the little cistern of my own individual life. They are God's gift. Let me cherish them with the awful carefulness which their origin requires, lest I should seem to have received the grace of God in vain. These two streams of truth are like the rain-shower that falls upon the watershed of a country. The one half flows down the one side of the everlasting hills, and the other down the other. Falling into rivers that water different continents, they at length find the sea, separated by the distance of half the globe. But the sea into which they fall is one, in every creek and channel. And so, the truth into which these two apparent opposites converge, is the depth of the wisdom and the knowledge of God, whose ways are past finding out--the Author of all goodness, who, if we have any holy thought, has given it us; if we have any true desire, has implanted it; has given us the strength to do the right and to live in His fear; and who yet, doing all the willing and the doing, says to us, Because I do everything, therefore let not thy will be paralysed, or thy hand palsied; but because I do everything, therefore will thou according to My will, and do thou according to My commandments!

**III. Lastly: The Christian has his salvation secured, and yet he is to fear and tremble.**

Fear and trembling. But, you may say, perfect love casts out fear. So it does. The fear which has torment it casts out. But there is another fear in which there is no torment, brethren; a fear and trembling which is but another shape of confidence and calm hope! Scripture does tell us that the believing man's salvation is certain. Scripture tells us it is certain since he believes. And your faith can be worth nothing unless it have, bedded deep in it, that trembling distrust of your own power which is the pre-requisite and the companion of all thankful and faithful reception of God's infinite mercy. Your horizon ought to be full of fear, if your gaze be limited to yourself; but oh! above our earthly horizon with its fogs, God's infinite blue stretches untroubled by the mist and cloud which are earth-born. I, as working, have need to tremble and to fear, but I, as wrought upon, have a right to confidence and hope, a hope that is full of immortality, and an assurance which is the pledge of its own fulfilment. The worker is nothing, the Worker in him is all. Fear and trembling, when the thoughts turn to mine own sins and weaknesses, hope and confidence when they turn to the happier vision of God! Not I--there is the tremulous self-distrust; the grace of God in me--there is the calm assurance of victory. Forasmuch, then, as God worketh all things, be you diligent, faithful, prayerful, confident. Forasmuch as Christ has perfected the work for you, do you go on unto perfection. Let all fear and trembling be yours, as a man; let all confidence and calm trust be yours as a child of God. Turn your confidence and your fears alike into prayer. Perfect, O Lord, that which concerneth me; forsake not the work of Thine own hands!--and the prayer will evoke the merciful answer, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee God is faithful, who hath called you unto the Gospel of His Son; and will keep you unto His everlasting kingdom of glory.